DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 370 384 FL 022 140

AUTHOR Iacobelli, Clare L.
TITLE A Business English Curriculum in an Academic Setting.
PUB DATE 93
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages and Communication for World Business and the Professions (12th, Ypsilanti, MI, March 31-April 3, 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Business English; College Faculty; College Students; *English for Special Purposes; *Foreign Students; Higher Education; Interviews; *Language Attitudes; Language Proficiency; *Second Language Instruction; Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *George Washington University DC

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the increasing enrollment of foreign students at American universities, especially in business programs, and the need for specialized courses in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) for business students. Focusing on the situation at George Washington University (GWU) in Washington, D.C., the paper reports on a survey of 98 EFL students at GWU conducted in 1992 concerning the students' attitudes towards a specialized EFL course for business students. Of the 55 respondents who were enrolled in the School of Business and Public Management (SBPM), 73 percent favored a separate or optional additional EFL course for business students. Seventy-five percent of the business students reported that they would have taken such a course, and 47 percent said that they would take such a course in addition to the standard EFL course. Interviews with faculty of the SBPM indicate that while some faculty focus only on content in evaluating students, others are very concerned about students' language comprehension and expression. (MDM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 370 384

A BUSINESS ENGLISH CURRICULUM IN AN ACADEMIC SETTING

Clare L. Iacobelli

Twelfth Annual EMU Conference
on Languages and Communication
for World Business and the Professions

April 1993

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Geoffrey Voght

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

FL022140

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

A BUSINESS ENGLISH CURRICULUM IN AN ACADEMIC SETTING

We are all aware of the growing international mobility of students, scholars, and professionals. For educational, economic, cultural, professional, scientific, technological, or political reasons, students increasingly constitute an important element of such mobility, therefore making a tremendous impact on the internationalization of higher education. Concerning international student enrollment in U.S. colleges and universities, no longer foreign to us are statistics like the following (Open Doors: Report on International Educational Exchange, published yearly by the Institute of International Education): 386,851 for 1989-90; 407,529 for 1990-91; and 419,585 for 1991-92. These figures account for approximately one-third of all study-abroad students worldwide, placing the U.S. as the leading host country. Of interest are also the places of origin, given the recent economic, business, and political trends in Asia and Europe. In 1991-92, 245,810 or 58.7% came from Asia, with China (42,940), Japan (40,700), Taiwan (35,550), India (32,530), and South Korea (25,720) as the top five. There has also been an increase in the number of European students, the second largest group, who in 1991-92 accounted for 12.8% of the total enrollment. Even with a decrease of 9.2%, the third largest group came from Latin America, accounting for 10.4% (Zikopoulos, 1991, 1992).

Statistics are also changing in the fields of study. Open

Doors has listed business/management as the field constituting the highest international student enrollment since the year 1989-90. This enrollment has accounted for approximately 20% of the total foreign student population in higher education, placing engineering, the leading field during the previous 40 years, in second position with 18% of the total enrollment (Zikopoulos, 1992).

This growing mobility of students pursuing degrees mainly in business/management is definitely due to a worldwide focus on economic development and marketing expansion. Thus, as business is becoming increasingly globalized, the demand for business degrees, such as MBAs (Master of Business Administration), is higher worldwide. Because of this increasing demand, the need for a business English curriculum in an academic setting is becoming more recognized. Such a curriculum should address the English language needs of the international graduate student seeking a degree in the field of business/management.

Enrollment statistics at The George Washington University, in Washington, D.C., are quite congruent with statistics on the national level. During the past five years, GWU has had an average of 17,000 to 19,000 students, with an international student enrollment of 2,244 to 2,669. (GWU ranks 13th in the U.S. in number of foreign student enrollment.) During the same period, the School of Business and Public Management (SBPM) has had a steady enrollment average of 3,500 graduate and undergraduate students per semester. Its international population has constituted up to one-

third of the University's international enrollment (from 24% in fall 1988, to 33% in fall 1992). Within the School, the international enrollment accounted for 15% of the 3,500 students in the fall of 1988, increasing to 17.5% (fall 1989), 21% (fall 1990), and 24% (falls 1991, 1992). The numbers of international students are slightly higher among the graduate students: 18% (fall 1988), 21% (fall 1989), 25% (fall 1990), 28% (fall 1991) and 27% (fall 1992). More striking, however, are the percentages of international students pursuing MBA degrees. In the fall of 1991, 456 out of 724 MBA students (63%) were from foreign countries. In the fall of 1992, there were 403 internationals out of a total of 661 (61%). Most of the figures for fall 1992 are slightly lower due to a decrease in overall enrollment. The percentages of international students, however, do not show a significant drop.

The Program in English as a Foreign Language at GWU averaged an enrollment of 500 to 600 students per year (including summer). The numbers have steadily increased from 674 in 1988 to 922 in 1992, with fall semesters constituting the largest enrollments (from 345 in fall 1988 to 483 in fall 1992). Just as the figures changed, the most popular field of study also changed from engineering to business/management. In the spring semester of 1988, a low 31% of the graduate students enrolled in our program came from SBPM. Then the numbers steadily increased to 38% (fall 1988), 46% (fall 1989), 56% (fall 1990), 60% (fall 1991), and 62% (fall 1992). These percentages are based on the total number of graduate students in our program ranging from 141 (fall 1988) to

220 (fall 1992), with an exceptional 266 (fall 1991). Graduate students in our program range from 40-50% of the total enrollment (parallel to national level figures: 46% graduate, 47% undergraduate in 1991-92). Since these enrollment changes are quite recent (as is the national trend), we have not offered business English regularly, but have developed several courses for special programs. Our curriculum has been offering technical courses for engineering and computer science students for several years. However, this reflects a trend which, as mentioned, is now changing on many campuses.

U.S. colleges and universities have lagged behind in the development of English for specific purposes (ESP) programs. Other than English for science and technology, there have been very few. However, the changing international student population will have a great impact on such curricula. In the recent past, it has been reported, ESP courses have finally become an important part of English language teaching, but unfortunately not as widespread in the U.S. as in other parts of the world. Now, however, there are signs of a growing interest in giving business English a place in the academic curriculum. (In the past, it has generally been treated as professional rather than academic training.) In a university setting, business communication courses have been offered in a variety of departments (e.g. English, Education, Management, Speech). Now, several university EFL programs are adding such courses as Business Communication, English for International Business, English for Business and Public

Administration, Management and Business English, and so on. Increasing rather rapidly in popularity and in number is the pre-MBA program.

The lack of business English curricula in U.S. higher education has prevented the development of business English textbooks with an academic emphasis. Existing ESP textbooks tend to focus on the skills used in the workplace rather than in academic settings. There is no lack of textbooks for office correspondence, business interactions, or English for specific professions such as banking and finance. However, there is a lack of textbooks that would better meet the needs of the student whose academic courses require critical thinking, case analyses, research papers, group projects, formal presentations, and a substantial amount of reading material. Some of the case analyses textbooks at the advanced level are quite good, however.

A case for a business English curriculum cannot (and perhaps should not) be made without getting input from the students themselves. As a coordinator and instructor of EFL 50 (a 3-credit course equivalent to freshman English composition) at GWU, in the fall semester of 1992, I conducted a survey of the students enrolled in all the sections of the course except for the technical section for engineering students. The purpose of the survey was to get feedback on the existing course, and to get input on a future business English course at the advanced level. The 98 respondents (out of a total of 115) included graduate and undergraduate students pursuing degrees in various disciplines. Concerning

business English, 66% favored a separate/optional course (this breaks down to 40% favoring an EFL 50 Business course, and 26% preferring an optional course after EFL 50); 50% would have taken such a course; and a surprising 40% would take it in the future in addition to EFL 50. Of the 98 respondents, 55 were enrolled in the School of Business and Public Management. Among these, both graduates and undergraduates, 73% favored a separate/optional course (45% for an EFL 50 Business course, and 27% for an optional course after EFL 50); 75% would have taken the course; and 47% would still take it in addition to EFL 50. Finally, focusing only on the 37 graduate students in SBPM (37 out of 98 is a high number of graduate students enrolled in an undergraduate freshman composition course); 76% favored a separate/optional course (49% for the separate EFL 50 Business, and 27% for the additional course); 75% responded that they would have opted for such a course if it had been offered; and 43% would take it in addition to the present course. The percentages favoring the additional course (40% of total, 47% of business, 43% of graduate business) are suprisingly high considering the time and financial limitations imposed on students by their sponsors. (Many graduate students are given 2-year scholarships to complete both their language requirements and their degrees.) Among the graduate students, the fact that 76% expressed a desire for a business English course merits our attention. Of the 37 graduate students, only two expressed no desire for any specialized course. The rest of the respondents favored adding some business materials to the existing

course.

A business English curriculum should be conceived not only with input from students, but also with input from their professors in their fields of study. Since November 1992, I have been interviewing professors in GWU's School of Business and Public Management. With an international student population accounting for 24% of the School's overall enrollment, 27% of its graduate students, and 61% of its MBA candidates, most professors have expressed similar concerns for the students' language skills. Although their major concern is for language skills rather than course content, most favor a business communication course for non-native and native speakers of English, perhaps developed and taught by both EFL and SBPM faculty.

While we all (students and professors) recognize the need and the importance of more specialized courses, we are continuously frustrated by shared concerns. The major student concern is getting the most by spending the least amount of time, money, and effort. Most students express the need and the desire for more English instruction, be it specialized or general, but they are pressured by time constraints imposed by their sponsors (family, government, employment), by the high cost of tuition, and by the very demanding coursework in their degree programs. Professors are equally concerned because we feel the strong need to deliver the kind of education students are yearning and paying for. As educators we try to refuse to be pressured by the same restrictions imposed on the students. However hard we try, we often find

ourselves feeling equally frustrated, and we therefore become more tolerant, lenient, and understanding regarding student performance in language skills. These are common feelings among my EFL colleagues. During my interviews with Business School professors, I encountered both tolerance and resistance. Some are satisfied with product that is at least comprehensible, some focus only on the content allowing the student to get help with the language, but some feel very strongly that without the appropriate language comprehension and expression students can neither obtain the required knowledge nor produce the required work.

Notwithstanding the mentioned limitations, the task of meeting the student's language needs remains our focus as language educators. As long as our job in a college/university EFL program is to prepare the student to function well in an academic context, whether general or specialized, then our task is to try to satisfy as many immediate needs as possible. Most college/university EFL intensive curricula include all basic language skills with an emphasis on general academic skills. It is at the advanced level, however, that specialization should occur. A common request from professors in other disciplines is that we focus on the instruction of language, whatever the content. That is a fair request if a student has not yet reached a certain level of language proficiency. Once this proficiency is obtained, then can a student focus on the specialized discourse and study skills needed in his field of study. Thus, my proposal is for a business English curriculum for advanced students (at or preferably beyond the level

of freshman composition). Such a curriculum should include courses for graduate students pursuing degrees in the fields of business/management/economics. The courses should emphasize the skills and types of assignments required in their disciplines. Most language instructors concerned with materials that are "relevant" or "authentic", use content-based materials which are original and unadapted. The meaning of "authentic", however, is too often associated with content, rather than with the skills required to succeed in very demanding academic disciplines. Needless to say, graduate students must be ready to do a substantial amount of research, reading, and writing, all of which require a certain level of linguistic competence as well as confidence. As EFL instructors we must keep reminding ourselves that our expertise lies in language teaching; thus, we should not pretend to teach business English as a business/management course but as a language course. In the proposed curriculum, we should work closely with business school faculty and strive for more integration of courses/materials. Many of the professors interviewed welcomed this idea, suggesting that we collaborate on developing business communication courses, pre-MBA orientation programs, and SBPM/EFL faculty workshops. These ideas are not new; they simply need to be more emphasized, communicated, and applied. Successful business English programs already exist in several U.S. universities. Harvard University's Office of English as a Second Language offers an extensive program using the business case study method. Yale University's Summer Program offers American English

for Students of Business, taught by EFL and Management faculty. Among other successful business English courses are those offered by English languge programs at San Diego State University, University of California (Berkeley and Davis), University of Arizona, University of Southern Mississippi, Boston University, and Columbia University.

The increasing foreign student population has fostered a general recognition and desire for more integration rather than isolation among academic disciplines. To EFL professionals working with matriculated students enrolled in various disciplines, the need has for a long time been recognized and, to a degree, met. Most EFL professionals have placed great emphasis on fulfilling the required standards of their courses, the requirements of the students' disciplines, and the needs of the individual students. The growing numbers of international students on college campuses have undoubtedly drawn attention to a more collaborative approach among disciplines.

Whether or not business/management remains the leading field of study among international students in the U.S., the numbers are high enough to justify a business English curriculum with an academic emphasis. Global business trends, statistical evidence, widespread concern, recognition, and interest, all combine to justify a curriculum that best meets the needs of our students.

Statistical Sources:

Zikopoulos, M. (Ed.). (1991). Open Doors 1990/91: Report on International Educational Exchange. New York: Institute of International Education.

Zikopoulos, M. (Ed.). (1992). Open Doors 1991/92: Report on International Educational Exchange. New York: Institute of International Education.

Office of Institutional Research, The George Washington University. Washington, D.C. (1988-1992).